

“SCHOOLDAYS ARE THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE”

Ivor Goodson with Chris Anstead

Somehow a school boy is no sooner done with his school and out in the business of life, than a soft haze of retrospect suffuses a new colour over all that he has left behind. There is a mellow sound in the tone of the school bell that he never heard in his six years of attendance.

Stephen Leacock. *Memories and Miseries as a School Master.*

Our reflections on School memories grow out of a series of teacher life histories prepared over a sequence of research visits and meetings in the past six years. Each project used as a major source of data, intensive interviews with teachers about their working lives.

For Goodson, the critical incident came in the middle of one of his interviews with a teacher he had come to know well. The tape had just finished and he was putting a new one in. Broadly, her recall of school teaching seemed “rosy”. Now retired, she looked back on a happy and harmonious professional life. As Goodson changed the tape, he teased her about it along the lines of, “hey, this all sounds great, I wish my life was as pleasant as yours has been!” Suddenly her face changed:

Look teaching is a terrible job, its tiring, its exhausting... You fail the majority of the children and so the majority of the children fail... why would I want to talk about that...

Her interjection which was followed by more taped interviews of her fulfilling life in teaching has returned to us again and again. This is particularly the case because so many retired teachers talk in similar terms about their professional lives. School students also tend to recall their experiences of education in a similar manner.

MEMORIES OF “TECH”

In our most recent project, we have confined ourselves to the reminiscences of retired teachers and former students in one school, a pioneer technical school founded in 1916. In this way, we reduce the number of variables, and can begin to chart the emergence and maintenance of a “memory” of the school which is collectively and socially processed and constructed. Ben-Peretz has summarised some of the characteristics of retired teachers’ life stories:

Retired teachers' reflection on practice, though, is not decision-orientated, nor do they seek defensible solutions to present and future problem situations. Their reflections are conclusion oriented in a highly personal manner, and serve as a summing up of the professional insights gained over time. The documented events of practising teachers are usually open-ended, not didactic, and are decision-orientated. Retired teachers seem eager to share their conclusions and insights with others. This characteristic of retired teachers' professional stories reflects Elbaz's notion of a 'community of listeners' whom the teller acknowledges and relates to. (Ben-Peretz, 1991, pp 17-18)

Our recall of that "interjection of dissent" however makes us unhappy with any monolithic judgement, whether about retired teachers' or former students' stories. If they are similar, we believe it is because they have been *collectively* constructed, negotiated and reconstructed over time. Why else would so many accounts from identical cohorts in the same school be so similar? In North America the school is one of the last socialising and collectivising public spaces. Here above all we believe *collective* memories are constructed.

Yet, in our interviews, although a broadly agreed collective memory can be readily tapped, a second sort of memory exists on the margins. In his research notes, Anstead reflected on these two responses from previous students of "Tech", our case study secondary institution. One type of interview is that which characterises school as a happy experience.

In these interviews, the subject stays on topic, answers questions in useful ways, and provides a lot of information to add to our brick by brick reconstruction of 'Tech'. In this sort of interview, the schooling experience is invariably presented in rosy tones. Frequently comparison to the present system of education is made, with many negative comments about the latter. The main themes of this sort of interpretation are: students were disciplined and showed respect for their teachers; every teacher - without exception - was good, and many went beyond the call of duty; and all students, whatever their socioeconomic background, were treated the same. The positive view of their school days probably results partly from the selection process; those people who most enjoyed or valued their school experience were most likely to answer our ad. Yet, I would not want to dismiss the positive out of hand; there is probably some truth behind the platitudes.

But another type of memory can also be tapped among a minority of former school members.

A few former students present more critical or analytical views of their past. Two such interviews took place last week. These students still have a generally positive view of 'Tech.', and present their school days as the 'best of times'. Yet they are also willing to say that certain teachers were not very good (or even unbalanced in one case). They can point to some types of